Times That Tried Men's Souls

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL

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700 JACKSON PLACE, N. W.
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

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SPECIAL

Civil War Centennial Observance

Sunday, January 8, 1961

A LETTER TO AMERICAN CLERGYMEN

America's greatest commemorative observance in all our history has been designated by the President and the Congress of the United States to cover the years 1961-65. During that time Americans will observe the Centennial anniversary of the great events of the Civil War.

Far beyond the educational historical features planned in many localities, the National Commission desires to impress upon our own people and upon those in other lands the tremendous significance of the spiritual aspects of the great struggle as well as what were our losses and our gains. We base our appeal for your participation in this great nationwide observance upon the thesis that they were all good Americans who participated in it – that the Civil War did not divide us – it united us. The important thing for us to remember is that all these men who fought were fighting for principles.

The charity of Lincoln, the unflinching fidelity to God of Lee and Jackson, and Grant's dedication to the cause of peace – surely these are the lessons which must be remembered by Americans long after the Centennial has passed.

On Sunday, January 8, 1961, the curtain rises on the Centennial when President Eisenhower is to deliver his Proclamation from the White House, inviting our citizens to rededicate and reconsecrate themselves to the great ideals which motivated our ancestors of a century ago. This, then, is one of the prime objectives of our Commission – to herald from the pulpits of America this greatest of all commemorative observances.

We invite you to join us and your fellow clergymen of all faiths in what we conceive to be an undertaking which cannot fail to provide inspiration to all Americans.

U. S. GRANT, 3rd
Major General, U. S. A., Ret'd.

Chairman

Times That Tried Men's Souls

The American Civil War was more than a test of arms. It was a spiritual proving ground as eternal as the human spirit.

Amidst blood, tears and privation, the God of battles gave men an inestimable chance — the opportunity to prove their nearness to Him. This they did by hundreds of thousands, in dying for convictions they supported as supreme and righteous. They spoke these convictions in words that carried farther than drums and gunfire, that will linger endlessly in time.

The words they used told of devotion, tolerance and duty, of a willingness even to die when facing a crisis of principles that justified the risk. Men uttered them then with differing viewpoints, but from a common highland of character.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S CREED

President Lincoln spoke, not for the inaugural crowd or the impatient newspapers, but to the universal human heart:

"Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away... With malice toward none; with charity toward all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

The words fell with moving impact around the world. For here, in America, in a terrible time of testing, a dedicated partisan besought tolerance and mercy for a foe.

No other war yielded so sublime a fruit.

Few wars, indeed, ever sharpened men's souls more keenly than the American conflict of 1861-65. With the July dust of Bull Run yet on his uniform, Stonewall Jackson, without mentioning his new-found glory, gave all credit to God for the victory and posted a contribution to a Negro Sunday school

class he taught at Lexington, Virginia. Soon, in Richmond, the Confederate Congress officially recognized "the hand of the Most High God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in the glorious victory with which He hath crowned our arms at Manassas."

IMPACT OF THE WAR

Throughout the South, church and synagogue doors opened for daily prayer, demonstrating a non-sectarian character by rotating the services. Revivals intensified faith throughout both armies, flaming highest, perhaps, during the winter of 1863-64, when the memories of such earthly trials as Chancellorsville and Gettysburg haunted millions of minds.

Famed ministers appeared in camps to aid the chaplains, bringing to the hard-bitten soldiers the eloquent persuasion of religious appeal. Some, though death constantly stared, passed it by; others by thousands found comforting expectations. A North Carolina soldier crouched in candlelight near Orange Court House, Virginia, to write home: "We have preaching almost every night." A "neat and comfortable" log house served as their chapel.

In no other war, perhaps, were principles of all faiths more etched on the minds and hearts of so many soldiers. A chaplain followed nearly every Northern regiment and probably as many served the Southern fighters. Many endured field service through the entire conflict, facing fire and working with the wounded. With uncontrollable ardor, some grasped the muskets of the wounded and fought in the line, later returning to their missions of mercy. Some requested commands and got them — to fight for the same principles which imbued the ranks.

THEY WALKED HUMBLY

A humble spirit pervaded them. They wanted no special considerations for themselves or their work. An upturned barrel might serve as an altar or pulpit. A tent was suitable for shelter. And the men, history relates, generally thought but little of what denomination served them. And they were served innumerable times on the brink of battle, at the icy edge of death.

Men remembered Father Corby of the Union Irish Brigade. As it swung into action under fire

at Gettysburg the priest won permission to have the men halt and kneel for absolution. Another minister, Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk, put off his robes as Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana to follow his convictions to his death by a cannon ball at Pine Mountain, Georgia, in 1864. The most dire news of the war for Southerners — that Richmond finally was doomed — came on tiptoe to Jefferson Davis as he worshipped in high-columned St. Paul's Church on April 2, 1865.

At the very beginning of the war, Lee in Christian posture left the verdict to God. A minister asked him: "Are you sanguine of results?" The great commander replied: "I am not concerned with results. God's will ought to be our aim, and I am quite contented that His designs should be accomplished and not mine."

One authority has aptly said: "Religion was almost as ever-present with the people as the war itself."

Why, so much, one wonders, at this particular period? The muse of history has pondered the question. Could it be because in the dreadful conflict when the nearest thing to men — their brotherhood — was sundered, they searched their hearts more deeply and found their principles and, having done so, groped for the highest of all support and humbly said that over all is God? Certainly, spiritual hunger gnawed deeply.

Bibles and religious tracts reached the Northern troops and sailors in enormous quantity. Most highly prized were the New Testament and the Psalms. Impoverished for Bibles by the blockade, the South eventually turned to its own publishing. But ingenuity was needed in the war's early stages. In 1862 the Rev. Moses D. Hoge, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, rode a blockade runner to England for a present of 310,000 Bibles and Testaments. During 1864, the London Bible Society slipped over a dozen heavy cases of Bibles through the blockade. Thus was a spiritual hunger satisfied.

Southern ministers vied with pulpits of the North in upholding their clashing convictions. Fires of oratory blazed; and many ministers clung to their views long after statesmen weakened. "What a sermon!" wrote Mrs. James Chesnut, a forefront Southern observer. "The preacher stirred my blood.... A red-hot glow of patriotism passed

through me. Such a sermon must strengthen the hearts and hands of many people."

BATTLES – THEN FORGIVENESS

Behind the striving of ministers – allied in God though opposed in principles – stood the supporting authority of Lincoln, Grant and Lee.

Though depredations occurred, Lincoln persistently insisted that Southern churches be unmolested. Long before the war's termination many Southerners had more than mere premonition of his leanings toward reconciliation. Lee's unswerving devotion to God and duty shone with his military genius and later in his presidency of struggling Washington College where he strove to heal the emotional hurts of the war. In his great desire to have the Nation reunited after Appomattox he urged his men to go home and work productively at anything they could find, and to participate sincerely in the government. Grant's benevolence broke dramatically through the iron of his will at Appomattox. His never-slumbering passion for peace is reflected in a letter he wrote when informed that all denominations prayed for him in his fatal illness some years after the war was ended:

"Yes, I know, and I feel grateful," he said. "All I can do is to pray that the prayers of all these people may be answered so far as to have us all meet in another and better world." And in a letter to Confederate General Simon Buckner, Grant wrote during his last sickness: "I have witnessed since my illness just what I have wished to see since the war: Harmony – harmony and good will – between the sections... We now look forward to a perpetual peace at home, and a national strength which will screen us against any foreign complication. I believe, myself, that the war was worth all it cost us, fearful as that was."

He bequeathed America four simple words of towering aspiration:

"Let us have peace."

To present-day Americans, rejoined in common principle in observing the 100th Anniversary of the American Civil War, President Eisenhower declares:

"I would urge in all our commemorations of the Civil War Centennial, that we look on this great struggle not merely as a set of military op-

erations, but as a period in our history in which the times called for extraordinary degrees of patriotism and heroism on the part of the men and women of both the North and the South. In this context we may derive inspiration from their deeds to renew our dedication to the task which yet confronts us – the furtherance, together with other free nations of the world, of the freedom and dignity of man and the building of a just and lasting peace."

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SUGGESTED CENTENNIAL ACTIVITIES

for

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

I. *Note Anniversaries of Most Important Civil War Events on a Nationwide Basis*

By regular or special services, including:

Sermons

Prayers

Music

Notes in church and synagogue bulletins and religious periodicals

II. *Suggested Topics for use by Clergy and Lay Groups*

A. Role of Religion During Civil War

1. Chaplains in the armed forces

2. Churches as emergency hospitals

3. Humanitarian and relief activities of religious bodies

4. Their role as a source of comfort and strength to those at home as well as to those in the field.

5. Historic churches – congregations and buildings of Civil War Period still extant

B. The Sprirtual Significance of the Civil War

C. Suffering as a Means of Redemption in our Nation's Life

III. *What Lay Organizations Can Do*

A. Sunday School, Parochial Schools, Jewish Community Centers

1. In styling biblical lessons, bring in Civil War events as historic parallels and guides to the present

2. Read and discuss Civil War letters and diaries containing expressions of religious faith

B. Men's and Women's Auxiliary Organizations and Youth Groups

1. Devote meetings to commemorative study programs

a. Assign specific topics for study

b. Have able guest speakers, including historians

c. Emphasize spiritual lessons and Civil War personalities that best exemplified religious standards of the times. *Note:* In this, get help of Minister of Education or comparable congregation officer

2. Hold special memorial services in honor of each religious group's role and members in Civil War

3. Have historical and educational programs in parish halls, church social centers and Jewish Community Centers

a. Plays and pageants (some congregations have Little Theatre Groups)

b. Musical and variety programs—songs and poems of Civil War (Minister or Director of Music can help)

c. Talks by historians, writers, and other qualified individuals

4. Have exhibits of Civil War memorabilia Letters, diaries, et cetera, loaned by members or by local collectors; include the congregations' own Civil War archives

5. Have your librarian prepare list of good Civil War books – general accounts, biographies, and books on religious aspects. (See bibliography at end of this pamphlet)

IV. Other Suggestions

A. Cooperate in community-wide Centennial activities

B. Arrange inter-faith programs, using radio and TV

C. Have religious periodicals carry special articles, poems, news and notes on Centennial and on religious aspects of Civil War

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